

THE AUK:  
A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF  
ORNITHOLOGY.

---

VOL. III.

OCTOBER, 1886.

No. 4.

---

ON AN OLD PORTRAIT OF AUDUBON, PAINTED  
BY HIMSELF, AND A WORD ABOUT SOME  
OF HIS EARLY DRAWINGS.

BY R. W. SHUFELDT.

SOMETIME during the latter part of May, 1885, I was the recipient of a very valuable gift from an esteemed lady of Woodstock, Louisiana, Mrs. E. C. Walker. This was nothing less than three of Audubon's early original boy-drawings of birds, and I came into possession of them through the kind intercession of Mrs. Walker's daughter, Mrs. Jamar, wife of Lieutenant Jamar of the 13th U. S. Infantry, then stationed at Fort Wingate, New Mexico.

It will be remembered by those conversant with the life of Audubon, that sometime during his youth he spent a year or more with his parents at Nantes, France. His wife tells us in his biography, that while at Nantes, this famous young devotee of nature made a hundred drawings of European birds. These were brought back by him in his portfolio on his return to America, and it proves to be that it is three of these juvenile efforts that I now have in my possession. Rare old treasures they are to be sure, and would that I could commit to paper the quickly-passing thoughts they inspire in my mind, as I hold them up one at a time before me! They cause us to wonder whether Audubon

really dreamed, as he worked away over these crude productions, of the man he was to be some day. And we wonder, too, as we examine them, at the rapidity of his artistic development and improvement.

They are each and all drawn by a combination of crayon and water-colors upon a thin and *not expensive* kind of drawing-paper, now brittle and soiled by age. Audubon had evidently numbered these drawings of his, and these numbers are 44, 77, and 96, a European Magpie, a Coot, and a Green Woodpecker, respectively. Sometime ago I had them all reduced by photography, with the view of publishing them, but although I have been temporarily disappointed in this, I may yet have an opportunity to bring them out in some other connection.

As I have said, the earliest of these drawings is the one of the Magpie—and let us look at it for a moment. It is life size, as they all three are, and the bird is represented standing on the ground, being drawn lengthwise on the paper. The execution is quite crude, though the naturalist ‘sticks out’ in it, for notwithstanding the somewhat awkward position the bird is in, there is life in it. The ground is simply a wash of pale green and brown, while over on one side of the paper he has ‘tried his brush,’ having made some rough concentric circles with paint dabs about them. Beneath this drawing we find written in lead-pencil in two lines, “La Pie, Buffon,” “Pye, Piot Magpye, Pianet, english,” and over to the left-hand corner, “No. 44.”

The second picture is that of a Coot, and is a marked improvement upon the Magpie. Far more pains have been taken with the feet, legs, bill, and eye, though little has been gained in the natural attitude of the bird. It is also represented standing up on the dry ground, which is here of a pale violet wash, unbroken by anything in the shape of stones or vegetation. Except very faintly in the wing, no attempt has been made to individualize the feathers, the entire body being of a dead black, worked in either by burnt cork or crayon. Beneath this figure has been written in lead-pencil, but gone over again by the same hand in ink, “La foulque ou La Morelle—Buffon, Riviere Loire Joselle—” “English—the Coot,—”

As is usually the case among juvenile artists, both this bird and the Magpie are represented upon direct lateral view, and no evidence has yet appeared to hint to us of the wonderful power

Audubon eventually came to possess in figuring his birds in their every attitude.

There is a peculiar pleasure that takes possession of us as we turn to the third and last of these figures, the one representing the Green Woodpecker (*Geococcyx viridis*). It is a wonderful improvement, in every particular, upon both of the others. The details of the plumage and other structures are brought out with great delicacy, and refinement of touch; while the attitude of the bird, an old male, is even better than many of those published in his famous work. The colors are soft and have been so handled, as to lend to the plumage a very flossy and natural appearance, while the old trunk, upon the side of which the bird is represented, presents several evidences of an increase of the power to paint such objects. We find written in lead pencil beneath this figure, in two lines, and in rather a French hand, "Le Pic vert, Buffon," "the Green Woodpecker—British Zoology."

When Mrs. Walker presented me with these drawings, I received a very valued letter from her with them, and in it she tells me that "there was a portfolio of quite a number and variety of birds left with my father by Mrs. Audubon, but they have been given to different members of our family. He left a half-finished portrait of his wife and two sons, a portrait of himself in oil colors, taken by himself with the aid of a mirror and a life size American Eagle; were they now in my possession I would most willingly send them for your inspection."

"Mrs. Audubon was governess in my father's family for several years, also in that of a neighbor's of ours. I presume you are aware she supported herself and sons by teaching during the years of Mr. Audubon's wanderings through America in pursuit of his collections. I was but a child at the time. He was with us eight months [in Louisiana], but during the greater part of the time was wandering all over the State, walking the almost entire time;—no insect, worm, reptile, bird, or animal escaped his notice. He would make a collection, return home and draw his crayon sketches, when his son John would stuff the birds and such animals as he wished to preserve. I regret greatly, Doctor, that I cannot gratify you in giving a more minute account of Mr. Audubon's life while with us. But I was too young at the time, and as all of the older members of my family have passed away, I cannot collect such items as I might have done some years since. The two [three] crayons I beg you will accept."

Several months after receiving this letter, Mrs. Walker came to Fort Wingate to visit her daughter, and to my great pleasure brought with her the oil-painting of Audubon she speaks of in the letter just quoted. I hold this valued little art-treasure in my left hand as I pen these words. It is a quaint and winning picture, painted on rather thin canvas, and tacked to a rough, wooden frame, some 26 cms. by 31 cms., and evidently hand-made. But the hair, *the eyes*, the mouth, the nose, are Audubon's! Not only that, but given us by Audubon's hand, and that grand old naturalist's face grows upon us as we look into it. He wears an old-fashioned dark-green coat, and a still more old-fashioned neck-cloth and collar. The background is filled in by rather a rosy-tinted sky, shading off into a blue above.

I was permitted to have a photograph made of this picture, which was kindly and handsomely executed for me by Mr. Ben Wittiek of Albuquerque, N. Mex. The negative was at once forwarded by me to my friend Mr. A. Richmond Hart of the famous photo-engraving establishment of Park Place, New York, and we are to thank the skill of his workmen for the reproduction of the photograph in the illustration of this old oil painting which now accompanies this article.

Taking everything into consideration, I believe the members of the A. O. U. will pardon the pride that arises within me, at having succeeded in reproducing such a picture *as this* of Audubon in the publication of an organization that we must all appreciate he would rejoice to know existed in this his own, and well-beloved country. I only hope, too, it will give others as much pleasure on seeing his face in 'The Auk,' as it has me in introducing it there, and I believe it will.

My Audubon relics hold a high place, in my eyes, among my earthly treasures, and I have in my possession at the present writing a long letter of his, written to Richard Harlan, and announcing in the P. S. his just having secured a "New Hawk" which he describes and names as Harlan's Buzzard. This letter was presented to me by Mrs. Audubon herself many years ago, and accompanied by a charming little note of presentation from the old lady, saying it was the last letter of her husband's that she possessed, etc., etc. This valued note I also have, and naturally prize it very highly. The letter itself has already been published in the 'Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club,' Vol. V. 1880. pp. 202, 203.